

And then....

Oe remembered that day in particular because the news had been abuzz. A large bridge had collapsed somewhere—he'd forgotten where—sending many cars to the bottom of the river. The death toll had crept up with each repeated broadcast.

Oe gazed out the window while sadness brimmed from the screen. A gentle breeze was blowing, and the sky was blue. In the distance, he saw little white dots of cherry trees in full bloom. Pained voices on the news; happy weather. This was the kind of day on which Oe submitted his divorce papers to city hall.

"Why did you divorce?" his junior asked frankly. He was usually more reserved; perhaps the alcohol had gone to his head. Oe wondered if his irritation came from hearing on the news that it had been a year since the bridge collapse, which made him remember that it was exactly one year since he got a divorce.

"We were incompatible."

"It wasn't an affair?" his junior pried further.

"Didn't I just say we were incompatible?"

Sensing he had gone too far, his junior apologized and backed off.

"I'm sorry."

Katori had quit the office last year during the rainy season, saying he intended to open his own business in the country. Almost right afterwards, a new member had joined the detective agency—a man by the name of Uchihara. He was twenty-eight, and had abandoned his six-year career as an office worker to transfer to this job. He and Oe were nearly twenty years apart in age, and they could almost pass for father and son. Since there was no one else to teach him the ropes, Oe ended up training him. Uchihara learned quickly, and he had a good feel for the job. His experience as an office worker had instilled manners into him, setting him apart from the kind of duds who became detectives right out of university. He knew when to back off, and he knew precisely when to push. But for Oe, Uchihara's ability to do everything to a tee got on his nerves. A junior who was a bit clumsy was more lovable and easier to relate to than a junior who was overqualified. No one needed a rising star of a swan in a flock of ducks.

As their conversation had stalled, they decided to pay the bill and leave the place. When Oe said he would cover the bill, Uchihara meekly bowed and thanked him. Since the subways were still running, they walked from the restaurant to the station. Uchihara had been the one to propose going to this *izakaya*, which Oe frequented.

"Didn't you say the grilled skewers are good there? I love those things," he had said with a grin. Oe had had no choice but to take him.

"Aren't you going to remarry?"

They walked side-by-side. His junior was taller than him. Oe felt a little weary that they were still having this conversation.

"I don't have someone *to* remarry. No one wants anything to do with a lowly middle-aged man like me."

His own words depressed him. His wife had proposed a divorce a year ago, right after he had finished a search for a missing person. His daughter had gone to university. In the early days of being away, she had cried out of loneliness. Now, a year later, even her monthly texts had

ceased. He was being left behind. *I'm probably the only one who feels lonely now*, he thought.

"I think you've got a seasoned-veteran sort of allure."

Oe could not take the compliment at face value. *What do you expect to get from sucking up to me?* he could only think coldly. He ignored the man and began to walk ahead of him.

"I really think so," Uchihara emphasized, catching up to him. "I like you, Mr. Oe, and I'm actually wondering if you'd go out with me."

Oe stopped and looked up at his junior. The man's tone was casual, but his face was serious. Oe knew he could have just laughed it off, or lightly told him to stop kidding around. They worked in the same office, and they would have to see each other's face many more times into the future. He knew it was the best way to keep things peaceful. But Oe did not bother laughing it off. His junior mattered so little to him that even when he confessed to being gay, it was not worth getting surprised over.

"I don't swing that way."

"I know. But if you're not completely against the physical stuff, would you at least give it a thought? I won't do anything you don't want to do. If you start to think it's gross, you'll just have to tell me, and—"

"Whether it's gross or not doesn't matter," he said curtly. "I don't even like you."

"Huh?" Uchihara said.

"I don't like people like you. You guys all seem full of empty talk."

He could see Uchihara's face tense.

"Aren't there places you gays get together? You should go there and find someone who has the same tastes as you."

"I guess you're right," mumbled his junior, looking at his feet. Oe began walking ahead of him.

"I've met someone before who was gay. I had no idea what was going on in his head."

Oe spoke loudly enough so that the man behind him could hear.

"All you do is have sex, right? It's a hopeless, unproductive relationship."

"Sure, but it's no better being married if your whole family abandons you, is it?"

Oe spun around.

"I heard she didn't even agree to a discussion. She must've been pretty sick of you, huh?"

Oe's face burned. He grabbed his junior's collar and swung a punch at his face. Uchihara collapsed to his knees.

"Wh—What the hell do you know?" Oe snapped. "Don't you dare mock me." His voice trembled.

"You mocked me first."

Oe's clenched fists shook in anger.

"This is outrageous, I've had enough of you," he spat, and strode to the edge of the curb. An empty cab conveniently pulled up just then, and he climbed inside. He did not look back.

Oe curled up inside the taxi. He was angry, so angry, that tears spilled out of his eyes. He had wanted to start over. He had proposed to do so over and over again, but his wife had been cold to him. So cold, it was hard to believe she had loved him before. One year had passed. But even now, Oe wished somewhere in his heart that they would get back together. He knew it was an impossible wish. He had received many inquiries in the past concerning divorcing couples. Women had been much more decisive when it came to severing ties.

Why do I have to be hurt by such a young, insolent guy like him? Why do I have to have salt rubbed

into my wound when it still hasn't even healed? Without any way to cope with his anger and sadness,
Oe had no choice but to lick his own wounds.